



Attachment 5

Positive Product Reviews

- 1. by Emily Short - An award winning author of interactive narratives.**
- 2. Press previews of entrants in the Independent Game Festival, by GameSetWatch.com and GameTunnel.com**
- 3. Product review by MacDirectory, an established print magazine that covers distinguished software.**

String Theory

Review by: Emily Short

Game: The Witch's Yarn

By: Mousechief Co.

The Witch's Yarn is an experiment in bringing together narrative and game for the casual player, from indie game designer Keith Nemitz of Mousechief Games. It was nominated for Innovation in Game Design at the 2006 Independent Games Festival, and caught my attention because the idea of interactive drama seemed closely related to the concerns of interactive fiction. In fact, Nemitz refers to the game as "interactive fiction" in a recent Gamasutra article about its design.

The design concept of The Witch's Yarn is that a story is playing out on stage, and the player has the opportunity to introduce new elements by cuing characters (and occasionally props) to take the stage next. Each time you cue a character, another set of events occurs, and the set of available cues changes. If things go badly, you can back the story up, either by taking back one cue at a time or by rewinding to the beginning of a chapter.

The interface is simple but appealing. Most of the screen is a view of the stage — whichever of several locations is currently the scene for our story. Both the graphics and the music are attractive and low-key, so that the game is a soothing play. Character images are laid over the stage image without a great deal of concern for blending them with their background — they don't appear to stand on the floor, most of the time — and they speak in text speech bubbles. I found this very mildly disconcerting at first, but then easy to deal with. This is all in real-time, but there are options to control the speed at which these speech bubbles appear. If you're a reasonably fast reader you may find that even the fastest speed is too slow for you, but fortunately you can also tab to force the next response to appear.

Since the action is low-key and so much of the story is presented in text, the writing is a particularly important component of the game. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, entirely. The text could have used a better proofreading, among other things: I saw a few typos, "your"/"you're" and "its"/"it's" mistakes, and similar errors: not unforgivable, but considering how comparatively smooth and professional the game looks otherwise, such flaws are jarring. The Gamasutra article above mentions that Mousechief has hired a writer for their next game, so possibly this will improve.

There are more than merely technical issues to think about. The premise of The Witch's Yarn is that a witch named Wednesday, formerly married to a mortal, decides to open a yarn shop, which she will run without the use of magic. Her family disapproves of this decision, and certain members do their best to thwart her; most of the game turns on her attempts to settle matters with her family and learn enough about running a business to survive. The writing is at its best when it is playful: Wednesday has a familiar, Greta, in the form of a pot of poisonous mushrooms. Some of Greta's lines and actions are quite funny, and several other characters get a bit of wit and sparkle, as well. The writing for emotionally dramatic moments is less consistent. Wednesday, her children, and her mother have a tendency to talk out their grudges and troubles at length. Some of their arguments rang true, but more often they turned schlocky or melodramatic, or simply ran too long. Admittedly it takes a very light touch indeed to write an intense conversation that can stand up to the rigors of being read over and over during replays.

Which brings us to another issue: the design of the game. I tend to divide interaction types in games into "choice" and "challenge" categories. A challenge is a puzzle or other scenario that requires the player to be clever or resolve a problem in order to unlock the next portion of the game; choice involves selecting, with some knowledge of the implications, one of several ways for the story to go.

When I saw the interface of The Witch's Yarn, I assumed that it would be hard to implement interesting challenges in this form, and that most of the player's important interaction would turn on choice. As it happens I was largely right about the first assumption, but largely wrong about the second — and the fact that the game does not let the player make many meaningful and intentional choices is its greatest weakness as a piece of interactive narrative.

I'll start with the puzzles. The Witch's Yarn is written with the casual player in mind, so that in the first two chapters (those available as a free demonstration) there is very little by way of puzzle: you cue people, the scenes play out, and while it's possible to introduce a bit of variation in what happens, it's rare to get entirely stuck.

The same is not true in later chapters. The game branches, and often only one line of approach leads to a positive outcome, while the others dead-end. Unfortunately, it's often nearly impossible to tell in advance which of the options is going to prove useful: though you can cue a character to come on stage, you can't always predict what he's likely to say or what the results of the scene will be. These scenarios can only be solved by exhaustively exploring options until by chance one finds a direction that leads somewhere useful. Frequently there are cryptic clues in the text, of the kind that make sense only in retrospect once you have already solved the problem. In other cases, you're given some guidance about what kind of intervention is needed next, but the puzzle itself still essentially boils down to a guessing game: which of these five objects is most appropriate in the current situation? If you get it wrong, you can always go back and solve by a process of elimination; but this is (as the game's website itself admits) not the stuff that tends to engage hard-core gamers. I'm not sure how much it engages casual gamers either.

At its worst, the replay puzzle design can be fairly annoying. It's one thing to have a puzzle where you have to replay, but wrong answers guide you closer to the solution by providing new clues: then you at least feel like you're making progress. Sometimes *The Witch's Yarn* gives this kind of feedback, but sometimes picking the wrong answer from a set of several just gives you a "Bzzt, wrong answer" response. Worse, sometimes it says "wrong answer" and puts you back at the beginning of a several-stage puzzle, so that you have to work your way back to the point where you made your mistake. Worst, it isn't even consistent about this: I found at least one puzzle where you had to play it through and fail once in order to set up a situation so that you can win the second time around. If, like me, you rewind the game after failing the first time, it can take quite a while to sort out what is going on.

What's more, the replay-and-replay-until-done method has an unfortunate effect on the emotional impact of the more personal scenes. If you're playing an argument between characters as a puzzle, you stop caring quite so much about who wounds whom; besides, by the time you finally play to a solution you've already seen all the lines four or five times. The effect of this could have been reduced a bit by introducing more variety of dialogue for different strands, and keeping the exchanges between cue-points shorter, so that there was less to re-read through. I still think it would have been best to try to design so that the player was not forced to play an emotionally intense scene more than a handful of times. (Admittedly, the chapter that most frustrated me, the sixth, was more annoying than it should have been because I kept thinking I had lost the game when, in fact, I had just reached a point that looked like a dead-end. Bad player, to some extent.)

All this is not to say that no interesting challenges can be constructed in this system. This interface is capable of more than I had initially given it credit for. The most sophisticated of its puzzles are those that involve getting steps into the right sequence: in a puzzle about shooting a commercial, for instance, you can choose the order in which Wednesday films things, but not all orders work equally well. Another about managing a party requires keeping too many people from arguing at once, so the player has to make sure to trigger some solutions before triggering new problems. These reminded me a bit of the sequence puzzle in *Lock and Key*, and were an effective use of the amount of freedom the player has – though there were still cases where too little information turned them into guessing games.

Another possibility, largely unexplored by *The Witch's Yarn*, would be to introduce more resource-management puzzles, where the player's choices earlier in the game affected what was available later. There are one or two points at which it is important to get certain objects, but it is usually impossible to know in advance what is going to be useful when; that's about as far as they explore that option, though I think they could have done more.

But this is largely quibbling, because the intention of *The Witch's Yarn* is much more about presenting a story for a reader than it is about presenting a challenge for the gamer. That said, I wish Nemitz had done more about making the story really controllable.

The idea of being able to cue new characters to come on stage and join the action is a clever one, and at its best it works well, but, as I said, it's almost impossible to know what effect someone will have when you trigger his entrance. Too often, several cues are presented but they are all more or less identical in effect: bring one character on and the other winds up joining in anyway, so that your choice makes no difference. Other times, your effect on the story doesn't go any further than controlling the order in which you see the same basic set of scenes. In the first chapter, it's possible to focus too much on finishing an assigned task, and thereby miss most of the interesting character interaction that might otherwise occur.

This is disappointing, because I think it would be possible to do more with this system. I was excited, in Chapter 3, to see that I sometimes had the option of making Wednesday do magic, despite her vow not to. Here's where a real choice might come into play: do we have the character honor her original plan, or do we have her take shortcuts? But if you have her cheat, the game immediately ends with her retiring in despair. So we're given a choice, but one is effectively a death condition, not a chance to make the narrative branch in interesting ways. And the narrative branching is what I would have been most interested in seeing. Another tantalizing but underexplored implication of the system is that you can make some plot threads more important than others by bringing certain characters back on stage over and over (driving those threads towards crisis), while ignoring others.

The Witch's Yarn does a certain amount with this. Some chapters allow the player to solve, say, three challenges out of a possible half-dozen; once you've done several of the puzzles, you're through. This makes the game easier because it means that puzzles that stump the player can be set aside in favor of others; it also means that it's possible to focus on one sub-plot and ignore others. One of my favorite moments of the game came when I decided to re-cue a person with whom Wednesday had had a preliminary encounter, knowing that if that character came back on stage, hostilities would escalate. As indeed they did – but for the most part, these decisions have no discernible effect on the major arc of the story.

Finally, because the player does not manipulate a single avatar, it's possible to control the flow of events in ways that aren't typically seen in interactive fiction: we're selecting elements to enter the story, not selecting the specific actions of individual people. In theory — though *The Witch's Yarn* does not go very far in this direction — we could also cue storms, natural disasters, the arrival of the bus... all sorts of elements that might affect the behavior of the characters and send the story in a new direction, even if they had no human agent within the story. This will, of course, only work if the player is given enough information to guess (at least a little) what a given cue is likely to do to the course of the story.

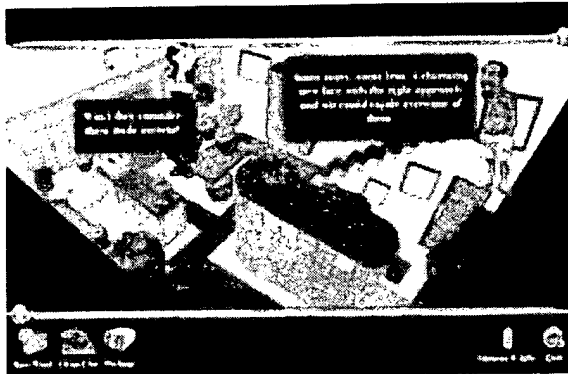
Obviously, I am asking for a game design strategy that tends to be expensive: the more significantly the narrative can branch, the more content one has to produce, the more writing time one needs, and the more testing has to happen before the game can be declared finished. Considering that Nemitz says he spent nine months writing the dialogue the game does have, I can see why creating more might have been prohibitively costly for the project. At the same time, I think the strengths of this interface would be better explored by a game design that favored richer branching and less repetition; I'd be content to abandon the notion of puzzles entirely if I could get in exchange a truly flexible narrative full of meaningful choices.

The Witch's Yarn uses a system of considerable potential, but it doesn't explore nearly all that that system could do: the puzzles could either be less repetitive or be dropped entirely, while the narrative could offer more consistently good dialogue and do more with the interactive possibilities of the system. I have hopes for future titles in this style, however. The attractive, soft-edged artwork and the mellow jazzy soundtrack make playing a relaxing experience rather than a frantic one, it's clear that a lot of polish has gone into the production, and the interface is immediately accessible for a casual user. Though I'm not sure I consider myself a "casual player", I did find the game a sufficiently pleasant experience to want to buy the whole thing, after the first two chapters. I imagine future stories may offer a more sophisticated use of the system here just being invented.

IGF Previews from the web.

GameSetWatch.com

IGF Gets Witch's Yarn Knitted, Finalists Quizzed



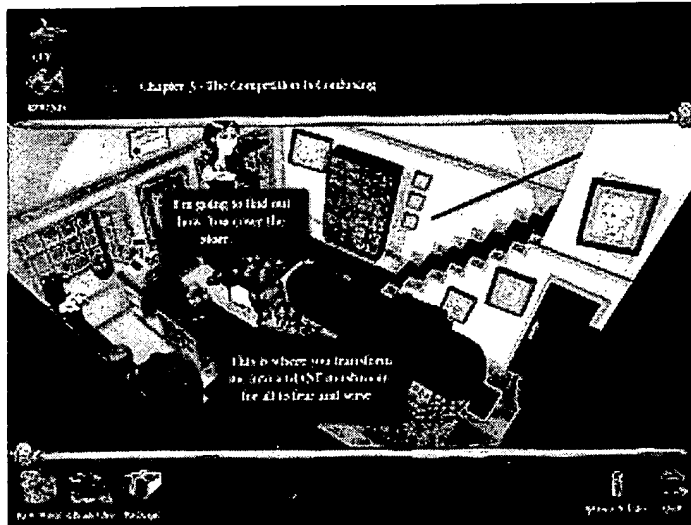
The 2006 Independent Games Festival is rapidly approaching, and we realized we had forgotten to point out sister site Gamasutra's multitude of interviews with IGF Main Competition finalists. The latest is with Keith Nemitz of The Witch's Yarn developer Mousechief, dealing with that PC/Mac title's unique story-based gameplay.

Nemitz explains the game's genesis, noting: "That was the inspiration, to bring interactive fiction to the masses, cut costs, and increase the player's immersion. Casual gamers were the only market we could approach for \$10,000. So, The Witch's Yarn was written as an interactive sit-com. Dear readers, please tell your non-gamer friends and relatives, who enjoy a leisurely read, The Witch's Yarn was developed for them."

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GameTunnel.com

The Witch's Yarn, Developer: Mousechief



The Witch's Yarn is quite unlike any other game at the festival. It plays more like a book or a play than a game, and provides a very innovative game play that will likely get this game noticed. In the game you don't control a character as you typically do in video games. Instead you queue actors into the story. So for example, the main character in the story is a witch who wants to open a store and join the everyday world. Her mother, who disapproves of the store appears, and... Well the next thing that happens is up to you, though to some degree it isn't really. You will be given several different characters or items to choose from, and after you choose one, the story continues around that item or character. After a couple more moments of the story moving forward, you'll choose another object or character and thus the game proceeds with you choosing what item or character will be the focal point of the next portion of the story, but not really choosing exactly what that item or character will do. This very different style of game play is targeted at female game players, but I think it is something that everyone can appreciate.

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The Witch's Yarn by Mousechief
Review by Keoni Littlemouse for MacDirectory

More than ever before, it's rare to find true innovation in games. Most developers prefer to tread a safe path, covering ground that's been well paved over – the first-person shooter, the real-time strategy, the fighting game. Don't get me wrong: I'm a fan of all genres, but it takes something truly special to make me want to play a game type I've played many times before.

The Witch's Yarn by independent game developer Mousechief is a noteworthy achievement. This game is a grand undertaking, meant not only to entertain an increasingly jaded avid gamer populace, but also to attract those casual gamers who might otherwise pass a smaller game by. In fact, this game should also appeal to those who don't consider themselves gamers at all.

The story's premise is this: Wednesday Brooks has opened her new yarn shop on a busy street. Her immediate goal (and the player's) is to entice people into her store to do some shopping. However, there is more to Wednesday than meets the eye. Wednesday is a witch, with powers that are only casually mentioned, but, one presumes, enough to make the ensorcelling of shoppers an easy matter. That, however, is precisely what Wednesday wants to avoid. She has come to the mortal realm (from where? I don't know... yet) to prove herself, and this means eschewing her magical abilities in favor of some good old fashioned business sense.

In this, Wednesday is assisted by her familiar, a potted set of mushrooms named Greta. Having done away with the staid and stale black cat that is the staple of so many witch characters, The Witch's Yarn immediately makes one sit up and take notice. From the

opening chapter, the player senses that this game and these characters are not cookie-cutter adventurer types – and that this is a very good thing.

Greta is there to provide a reassuring and calming influence on Wednesday, who displays bouts of restlessness, worry, anger, and sometimes despair. This witch is no nose-twitching, perky cheerleader, but a thoughtful, feeling woman.

Indeed, much of her emotional reactions stem from the appearance of her mother (also a witch), the communications with her three children (of various abilities and temperaments themselves), and her memories of her departed husband.

It is this emotional landscape that provides so much of the depth of *The Witch's Yarn*, and what makes the game so enjoyable. The narrative never assumes the need to lead the player by the hand, and develops a tone that is warmly conspiratorial; you want to help Wednesday succeed, sometimes despite herself.

Mention here should be made of the gameplay, if only to point out the equally innovative *CineProse*TM system. Based on a theater stage model, this system relies not on flashy and frame-count-heavy animation, but on simple, direct illustration and text. This is a welcome change from an increasingly 3D world, where all too often the very sophistication of the character models is the very thing that takes the player out of rapport with the game.

Instead, nicely illustrated backgrounds provide excellent frames for the portraits of the various characters as they interact with each other, which is really the main focus of a good story, or ought to be.

Also worthy of mention is the jazzy soundtrack which is never intrusive, but always lively, and a welcome respite from the frequently annoying music of other games, with their overused dramatics and all too short loops.

Gameplay is advanced by the adding to the scene of potential characters or objects, represented by icons at the top of the stage. Experimentation is welcomed, and facilitated by the inclusion of a Rewind button, which allows the player to go back to a decision point and try a different tack. This inclusion is deliberate.

Mousechief (and remember to pronounce that like 'mischief') wants to emphasize that this game is based on the richness of interactions between people, much like a good fabric is made from the rich inter-weavings of different skeins of yarn.

In fact, the weaving theme is carried throughout The Witch's Yarn, from the initial description of the operation of a loom, to the threads of conversation that make up the gameplay, to the implications that the player is attempting to reconcile a particularly tangled string of fate on Wednesday's behalf. While it's never brazenly stated, such clues are everywhere for the astute player to grasp, which makes this game a treasure indeed. There is so much to enjoy here that it's difficult to sum up the rewarding experience in just a page of text. Here's hoping that Mousechief enjoys great success with The Witch's Yarn, and is able to continue to create innovative, enjoyable games with both unusual depth and uncommon heart.

Name: The Witch's Yarn

Website: www.mousechief.com

price: \$13.00 (first two chapters playable in demo)

pros: Appealing to thinking players

Challenging situations and puzzles

Excellent and colorful artwork

Great background music

A likable protagonist

cons: these characters cry out to be animated!

summary: An immersive and thoughtful adventure with deep story elements and characters.

rating: 5 stars